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FLARR Pages #65: The Role of Teachers in Russian Society

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FLARR PAGES #65

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•History
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•Progress

"The Role of Teachers in Russian Society,"
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Napoleon Bonaparte once said "You give me an educated mother and I will give you a powerful nation!" Our mother is our basic yet primary teacher whose moves strongly influence our demeanor right from the very beginning. And since parental attitude plays a vital role in determining our character, teachers similarly play a big role in shaping the character of humans. Now tell me please what associations you have when you hear the word "teacher". According to a Russian psychologist Vladimir Levi profession of a teacher is multi-sided. So being a teacher means to be friend, tutor, informant, instructor, appraiser, critic, trainer, actor, clown, idol, nurse, organizer, observer, trustee, preacher, psychotherapist. So what role in society can be more crucial than that which shapes children's lives and prepares them for adulthood? Given what society expects of them, teachers could be expected to be placed on a pedestal. Unfortunately, quite the contrary has occurred. In many parts of the world, they are underpaid or unpaid for long periods; held in low esteem or attacked for failing to meet undefined 'standards' etc.

Now I would like to speak about the role of a teacher in the Russian society for the last 20 years. I will tell you about positive and negative events which have been taking place in Russian educational system since 1980's.

Russians have always shown a great concern for education. The right to education is stated in the constitution of the Russian Federation. It's ensured by compulsory secondary schools, vocational schools and higher education establishments.

In the Soviet period, education was highly centralized, the Soviet government operated virtually all the schools. Its advantages were total access for all citizens and post-education employment. The government perceived education to be an important tool in the preservation of the Soviet state. It was understood that not only does education provide training of the young for the specialized demands of a

technologically modern state but it keeps the country competitive with other nations in a geopolitical and socioeconomic sense. Education plays a dominant part in creating values and beliefs, in creating and maintaining creative talents for the preservation of national interests. In the late 1980's school years, more than 2 million students were enrolled in teacher training programs.

Soviet society generally held the teaching profession in high esteem, continuing the long prerevolutionary tradition, although teachers' salaries were not commensurate in this regard. With starting pay as low as 140 rubles per month (compared with the average worker's salary of 200 rubles), teacher's salaries, especially at the primary and secondary school levels, were on the lower rungs of the pay scale. The salaries and prestige of teachers at universities and specialized secondary schools were higher than those of general secondary-school teachers.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the transition toward democracy had a profound effect on national education policy. Through the 1990s, educational reform programs have concentrated on eliminating political ideology and moral education from the curriculum so that the learning process is more attuned to the needs of a market-driven economy. More attention has therefore been devoted to the teaching of professional disciplines such as business, management, law, economics, computer technologies and accounting. Additionally, teaching methods have been addressed in an attempt to move away from the Soviet-style pedagogical methodology of rote learning towards a more student-centered methodology designed to promote critical thinking skills. But inadequate state budgetary allocations have, however, frustrated many of these reform efforts. In 1992 a structural and philosophical reform agenda was set forth in the Law on Education. The fundamental principle of that law was the removal of state control from education policy. Therefore, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, expenditures on education took a big blow; institutions found themselves unable to

provide adequate teachers' salaries, students' scholarships, and maintenance for their facilities. Teaching profession has lost talented individuals because of low pay; In the 1992-93 school year, Russian schools had about 29,000 teacher vacancies, and in the following year 25 percent of all teaching positions were unfilled. Although low pay has damaged morale among Russian teachers, they were more disillusioned by the end of the idealistic first post-Soviet years of innovation and freedom of speech and the continued decline of their material environment. In the mid-1990s, rural schools experienced particular difficulty retaining teachers, as qualified young adults sought opportunities in larger communities.

In 1995 the projected budgetary expenditure for education was about 3.6 percent of the total state budget while in 1970 the spending on education made up 7 per cent of the Soviet gross domestic product. The financing system made educational institutions fully dependent on state funds; outside sources of funding did not exist because no tax advantages accrued from investing in education.

To address the issue, many state institutions started to open commercial positions. The number of those positions has been growing steadily since then. State education is free, but by 1992 several state higher-education institutions had begun charging tuition. At that point, almost half of students above the secondary level were paying fees of some sort. The 1992 Law on Education provides explicitly for private educational institutions; in the ensuing years, several organizations for private education have appeared, and a variety of private schools and colleges have opened. By 1992 about 300 non-state schools were being attended by more than 20,000 students.

As public schools debated what to do with their new academic freedom, private schools and preschools became centers of innovation, with programs rediscovering prerevolutionary pedagogics. Private schools emphasize learning English and other critical skills. Student-to-teacher ratios are still very low, and teachers' salaries average about US\$170 per month while tuition may be as much as US\$3,000 per year.

Hence, you can see that if in Soviet Union a teaching profession was in high esteem though low-paid, in Post-soviet period teachers started to face hard problems when the education sector was decentralized under the 1992 Education Act. The decentralization led our country to confusion and became a burden to educational and governmental administrators regarding how to adapt to this new type of structure.

Accordingly the due dose of attention was not given to teachers and their welfare and that was the blunder committed by the government.

But if we want to build a strong nation we have to pay attention to bringing up the new generation and it is a teacher who forms the society-worthy, sensible individuals who are able to contribute to their country's prosperity.

What is the current situation in Russia? Today there is a 99 % of literacy rate but still we face an increase in social stratification, a differentiation among educational institutions, and the emergence of a system of paid education services. Despite constitutional guarantees of tuition-free higher education, strains on the federal budget over the last 15 years have ensured that full public support for higher education has become impossible at both public and private institutions. Indeed, many public institutions are now dependent on tuition revenues as the second major source of income after state allocations. All these developments are making education less accessible to low-income citizens. Many teachers are not well-paid.

Nevertheless there are more steps in the right direction. The federal government has recently adopted programs that provide for a set of measures to modernize educational institutions and improve the quality and efficiency of education.

The program provides for a transition to a 12-year program of education, the introduction of a unified state examination and the inclusion of more technical subjects in the basic high school curriculum. The government also tends to shift the responsibility for financing teachers' salaries from the municipal level to the regional level, while local budgets will still be responsible for maintaining the infrastructure of educational institutions. The 2002 consolidated budget saw a 60 percent increase in the allocation for education compared with the previous year. The national project called "education" is successfully carried out in Russia. It provides the best teachers and schools with monetary grants and also grants for talented pupil and access of all remote schools to the Internet.

Education plays a crucial role in determining social status in Russia. People who leave school may rise no higher than skilled labor or low-level white-collar work. A college or university education is necessary for most professional and bureaucratic positions and appears to be highly desirable for a position of political power.

Current reform efforts are outlined in a government-approved document entitled "Concept of the Modernization of the Russian Education for the Period until 2010." This document provides the framework for all innovations, experiments and education reforms. One of the most important goals has been to develop state standards for basic and secondary education, including federal guidelines on minimum curriculum requirements. Priority has been placed on developing the teaching of foreign languages, economics, and information and communication technologies.

Recent pronouncements from Prime Minister Vladimir Putin have called for a renewed effort to tackle additional problems that have plagued the education system for more than a decade: low salaries, poor and outdated facilities and teaching materials, and inadequate regulatory mechanisms. The Ministry of Education and Science announced that budgetary allocations for education would be increased from 3.5 to 5 percent of GDP suggesting that the desired reforms might have better prospects than in the past.

At last we realized that teaching is the essential profession, the one that makes all other professions possible. This profession requires great responsibility and hard work. I'm a teacher too. I have small expertise in teaching, fortunately I didn't realize all those educational reforms, but I have an idea what it means to be a teacher. My grandmother, my uncle, my aunt are all teachers. They witnessed all difficulties caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union and accordingly changes in educational system but they didn't give in, they survived and what's more they implanted me the love of teaching. They influenced my choice of being a teacher and today I say thanks to all of them, because I love my job, I love working with students and I consider it to be the purport of my life. Like all teachers, I tend to perfect my knowledge as I want to give my students good knowledge; I want to share some life skills with my students for them to survive in tomorrow's world; I want to be a worthy role model for them. To achieve all these goals I have to work hard, to study much and I know that I know nothing. And this is the mindset of most teachers and it gives us an impulse to develop further.

Teaching is a life long duty; once one enters into the service, his duty is to fight any ignorance, any backwardness and poverty throughout his life; his duty is to bring about anything coming under the term goodness. It is often said police service is 24 hour service, but that of a teachers' is life long. It demands to be good and fit morally, psychologically and mentally.

Being here in the United States is a good chance for me to enrich my knowledge, to exchange my experience with american colleagues, to apprehend american educational system, culture, values and spread this knowledge on my homeland. At the same time I try to enrich American students' knowledge about Russia, its traditions, customs, language. Mutual popularizing of cultures, languages, national traits is important, because in the world where globalization has become a buzzword, understanding cultures is the key issue. Through all these actions we, teachers, hope to contribute somehow to our Motherland and revive love for our profession.

So the value systems of the Russian society have to be guided by the principle of human goodness and the maxim should be that, man does not live by bread alone, and for getting good milk, the cow has to be fed well. Without giving any concern to teachers, expecting any good thing is a blundering step. The right perception of the role of teachers should be redeemed in a very serious proportion. The Guru status should be again revived and restored to teachers. More than ever before in our history, education will make the difference between those who will prosper in the new economy and those who will be left behind. It is time we give teachers the education and support that they need to teach our children to the high standards that the challenges of the 21st century demand. May be then like Napoleon said we will be able give our country a powerful nation and our land will head for progress in the right direction. And let me leave you with the following saying: "A man without a guidance is nothing more than an animal".